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INAUGURAL  
SERMON

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RABBI DR. J. H. HERTZ

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TE BETH 23, 5672  
JANUARY 12, 1912



Lydia  
New York

Mr. Graham, Dr. M. Lester

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CONGREGATION ORACH CHAYIM  
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23, 5672

JANUARY 13, 1912

*With the Compliments of*

THE REV. DR. J. H. HERTZ.



CONGREGATION ORACH CHAYIM  
NEW YORK

Inaugural  
Sermon

RABBI DR. J. H. HERTZ

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OR the third time in my life I stand to-day on the threshold of a new ministry. With this hour I enter the arena of this world-Kehillah of New York as the spiritual guide, teacher and champion of Congregation Orach Chayim.

Only too well do I know the difficulty of the task I have undertaken. Although a stranger to most of you, I am yet as home-born in this city, and realize as any the larger problems at least that here clamor for solution. It is in this city where in my earliest years the inextinguishable yearning to interpret Judaism and cause its children to see the ineffable beauty of their religion seized me. This yearning brought me to sit at the feet of Sabato Morais, Alexander Kohut, Marcus Jastrow and Benjamin Szold—to name but those who have gone to their eternal reward. It is over a quarter of a century ago that these great teachers in Israel, with their fellow-workers still happily with us, began the good fight on behalf of an undivided Israel and on behalf of an unbroken connection with Israel's history and Israel's traditions. The Almighty, who shapes our destinies, has so willed it that I, the first graduate of the Seminary they established, was for thirteen years to toil under other skies on a distant sub-continent, in one of the youngest of the world's Jewries. But now, across many seas have you called me to become your rabbi, and I have bidden farewell to dear friends and dearer fields of labor to help in the grappling with the religious, educational and organizational problems which, as nowhere else in the Diaspora, are concentrated in the New York community.

As the difficulty, so do I feel the vast responsibility that from this moment becomes mine. It is no ordinary congregation that I am to lead further and further into Judaism. A congregation is often nothing more than impersonal combination of individuals bound together by the accident of Jewish birth and the willingness to pay a certain fee for synagogue purposes. Not so

the congregation whose good fortune it was to have had a Joseph Mayor Asher as its rabbi. That sainted scholar and inspired preacher, who in his brief life proved such a power for the advancement of all things that are pure and for the restraint of all things that tend toward unrighteousness and un-Judaism, has added the last touches to render you distinguished among congregations. It makes all the difference in the world whether we put truth—of thought, action, life—in the first place, or only in the second place. And out of the indecision to the order in which we are to place truth nothing ever evolves. It invariably only involves us—in hypocrisy, indifference and spiritual sterility. Now you, the members of Congregation Orach Chayim, have taken the word “orthodox” and have written it in large letters on the flag of your congregation. But being men and women with convictions and not merely opinions, placing truth of life in the first and not in the second place, you justify and vindicate your right to the use of that title by brooking no disharmony between your religious profession and your religious practice—a rare phenomenon, alas, in contemporary Israel. No other English-speaking congregation in the world, to my knowledge, insists on Sabbath observance as the indispensable pre-requisite for admission to its membership. An ideal is leading you irresistibly on, that of the fearless, timeless prophet, Elijah, the zealous servant of the Lord. Like him, you do not halt between two opinions, neither do you “choose your path” of duty; but clinging to the Torah and the whole Torah, you regard life as a schooling, a discipline, and you joyfully yield unconditional obedience to that law which Moses gave as an eternal heritage to the Congregation of Jacob.

The assumption of the leadership of such a congregation naturally presupposes a definite kinship of spirit and a virtual identity of aim between the covenanting parties. “Can two walk together except they be agreed?” asks the prophet. And the fact is that without misunderstanding I cannot well evade

the necessity of stating at this moment the basement principles of the Judaism I expect each child of Israel to love and to live. I will therefore turn to a scene in the life of Elijah which our rabbis have embellished for us with deep and luminous thoughts. It is the scene with his beloved disciple in the moments immediately preceding his translation to Heaven. "In that supreme hour of their lives," they ask, "what were the themes of vast import to mankind that engrossed them?" The question is variously answered by them. "Some declare that it was the **READING OF THE SHEMA**; others maintain that it was the **MYSTERY OF THE DIVINE NATURE** that busied them; still others hold that it was the esoteric exposition of the **STORY OF CREATION**, and the **CONSOLATION OF JERUSALEM**." Bear with me, my friends, while by means of this profound utterance, I indicate to you the larger lines on which my aims and dreams shall move; what it is that shall guide me in my endeavors to make the principles of *Orach Chayim* to prevail in American Jewry.

The keynote—yea, the beginning, middle and end—of all my teaching, I may safely say, will be the **READING OF THE SHEMA**, the exposition of "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." That is at once the quintessential embodiment of all our philosophy, as well as chief among Israel's contributions to the eternal values of life. The first prayer of innocent child-lips, the last confession of the dying, the Shema has been the watchword and the rallying-cry of a hundred generations in Israel. By it were they welded into one Brotherhood to do the will of their Father who is in heaven. Jacob on his deathbed was seized with despair regarding the future that awaited his children as he recalled their strifes, divisions and differences. Hope again became victor in his breast only when he heard them with one voice exclaim: "Hear, O Israel, the one God will ever remain our God; forever and ever shall we proclaim His name, His kingdom and His glory." Ever since has the reading of the Shema—in Midrashic phrase—clothed Israel

with invincible lion-strength and endowed it with the double-edged sword of the spirit against the unutterable terrors of his long night of exile.

That invincibility would still be ours, if our reading of the Shema were always in accordance with the *Din*, the authoritative interpretation and the immemorial custom of Judaism. When a man reads the Shema, the Jewish law prescribes, he must do it audibly, so that his own ears at least should hear it. Now many to-day blush at the mere thought of a loud, articulate proclamation of their Judaism. They are Jews "at heart," in their own home, they tell us; but as for publicly showing their colors, they will recount a dozen excellent reasons to you for hushing their Shema. Of old it has furthermore been taught, "There is to be no interruption in the reading of the Shema, even if a king greet a man; no cessation, even if a serpent wind itself around his feet." The hissing demon of anti-Semitism causes many to cease repeating their "Hear, O Israel"; to deny and disguise their origin. While in older countries, a greeting by a King—a patent of nobility, a decoration—is but too often translated by both grateful recipient and gracious giver as an invitation to apostasy.

Our proclamation of Judaism will be open, clear, honest. Our fathers died for the Unity. It is for us to live for it, and yield to it an undivided allegiance of heart, soul and substance. The reward is great. It will lend unity to our lives. It is not in vain that the rabbis call the reading of the Shema "the taking upon ourselves of the yoke of the kingdom of heaven." Verily it brings our wills into harmony with the Divine will, and teaches us subordination to the larger purposes of God as revealed in Israel's story.

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The proclamation of the Unity of God is immediately followed in the Shema by the command, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God." Now, love always presupposes sympathy, soul-communion, some glimpse at least of the object beloved. Like Elijah

in our Midrashic text, therefore, we also will ponder on the NATURE OF THE DIVINE BEING. Though there were times when the Sages justly feared great dangers from such study by the masses, religion was to them more than custom, hearsay or convention. At all ages do we meet with the mystic's longing for the loving communion with the Source of all things. This Jewish yearning for the Love of God is something which the dry rationalism of the early German-American reformers did neither share nor understand. Even their successors to-day do not see that, though men have died for metaphors, they cannot live on epigrams no matter how pointed or paradoxical, on phrases, hollow and superficial. As for us, like psalmist and sage, prophet and paytan, mystic and martyr do we seek God, pant for the living God as the hart panteth for the water brooks.

But because our seeking of God is conducted by us as Jews, the perfect sanity of Judaism will never forsake us. Even a Moses is warned, "No mortal man can know the Divine face to face. Only from the rearward canst thou know Me." As a ship sails through the waters and leaves its wake behind, so the Divine Power passes through the universe, and, though unseen, leaves behind it the traces by which alone it can be known. And the clearest wake of the Divine through the Ocean of time—a Gulf Stream that fills the whole history of humanity with the warmth of the love of God—is Israel. The Mystics of old, who made the Merkabah—Ezekiel's Chapter on the Divine Chariot—the centre of their theosophic speculations, gave utterance to a bold but wonderful thought when they declared "The Patriarchs, they are the Divine Chariot." In other words, no mortal need hope for the direct vision of the Throne of Glory. And it is only in the story of the Fathers, in the soul-history of our fathers, as recorded in that Book of Books, compared with which all other literatures are trifles light as air—that the Jew finds his God, re-discovers himself, and knows himself the link of a mighty chain, that no power under heaven can ever destroy.

The all-surpassing importance of such historic spirit-continuity is but feebly felt by our youth of to-day. We are told of a heathen Frisian chief one thousand years ago and more, who was about to succumb to the arguments of a monk that undertook his conversion. He had already entered the river for baptism when he innocently asked, "You promise me heaven if I follow thee; but where will my ancestors abide who departed this life ignorant of all thy teachings?" On being told that these would forever burn in hell, the old chief retraced his steps out of the river and exclaimed : "Monk, if hell is the lot of my fathers, let it also be my lot. Heaven without my fathers to share it with me, would not be heaven. Hell, with my fathers, loses for me all its terrors." My friends, the answer of that poor benighted heathen proves him to have come nearer to the root of the matter than many a prophet of the *Zeitgeist*. These conceive of religion merely as a sort of big Ambulance-wagon, to rescue the vast army of physical, intellectual and moral cripples. Whereas religion is far more than an Ambulance-wagon. It is a Pillar of Light, guiding the generations through the deserts of life, linking father and son in natural piety, pointing out to them the footprints of the divine on the pathways of history. To us these are the lives of our fathers. Join we them in spirit-fellowship, and like them, in the maddest maze of things, when most tossed by storm and doubt, we will know a Mighty Hand guiding us, feel the Heart of all things beating in sympathy for and with us.

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Nothing less than a new and novel conception of Man's Place and Duty in Creation would be the result of such a proclamation of Judaism if accompanied by such Jewish communion with our Maker. The **CREATION CHAPTER** in Genesis would have a new and undreamt of meaning for us. As the earth follows the sun in its vast sweep through heavenly space, and yet at the same time daily revolves on its own orbit, even so man, in the midst of the larger national and cultural whole of which

he is a part, ever revolves on his own orbit. Man, made in the image of his Maker, has been endowed by Him with the power of creating; and the little sphere in which Destiny has placed him is largely of his making. It depends upon us whether our little world be a cosmos—order, law, unity ruling in it; or whether it be a chaos—desolate and void, and darkness for evermore hovering over it. We can speak “Let there be light!” until perfect day envelopes our path; or we can lose the divine faculty of distinguishing moral colors, and like some of Isaiah’s contemporaries call the light dark and the darkness light, call good evil and evil good. In the Talmud tractate of Hagigah, we meet a curious fancy of the rabbis concerning the creation. On the first day when the heavens and the earth were being called into existence, matter, they tell us, was getting out of hand, and the Divine Voice had to resound: “Enough!” So far and no further! This, they point out, is the inner meaning of the Divine name, Shaddai. In our lives, likewise, the primal question ever remains, “Does matter rule the spirit? or, is matter getting out of hand, overwhelming and crushing out soul?” The Shema, with the Shaddai-inscription on the doorposts of our houses, demands of us the Imitatio Dei, the supreme duty of imitating the Divine in saying “Enough!” to worldly temptation, to rebellious matter. And the Sabbath, “the memorial of creation,” is a constant reminder of our God-like, creative faculty, of our potential victory over all material forces that would drag us down.

As at no other time is the Sabbath the touchstone of the sincerity of our Judaism to-day in America. There has been of late no dearth of beautiful professions of Sabbath observance. But if these remain merely professions, they are so much sound and smoke, signifying nothing! We furthermore plead for a home-Sabbath, not merely for an official Synagogue-Sabbath. We stand for the hallowing of home, for the hallowing of life, under the sanctifying influence of our Torah. “The Synagogue is that place where, if nowhere else, we may find a refuge for

our Judaism," is the pious wish of many. But a Judaism that has to find a refuge in the Synagogue is in its last gasps and is not our Judaism. We can conceive of no God-full Jewish home-life which is Sabbathless. The Falashas, that forgotten Jewish tribe in the interior of Abyssinia, cut off for ages from their brethren of the house of Israel were some years ago sorely harassed by hired missionaries to name the Saviour and Mediator of the Jews. They spoke wiser than they knew when they answered, "The Mediator of the Jews is the Sabbath." For without it, there can be no congregational communion, no organized proclamation of Judaism, nor any free exercise of our creative self-emancipation from the more than Egyptian thraldom of worldliness, circumstance and necessity.

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Only one more Elijah-theme will we now consider, namely, the duty of the **CONSOLATION OF JERUSALEM**. The terrible disillusionments which the first decade of the twentieth century has brought with it should have convinced all that for the greater portion of our race the Kingdom of Heaven is not yet, that Israel is still a Man of Sorrows, acquainted with woes; still the Great Misunderstood of History; at once the Scapegoat and Saviour of Nations. In view of this recognition forced upon us, are we, who are children of Freedom, doing our full duty by Israel? Are we consoling Israel? Are we making consolation superfluous in that we are endowing the sons and daughters of our people with the lion-strength that their fathers possessed, to withstand all manifestations of the eternal hatred against the Eternal People? Or, are we of those whom Welsh riots and even Russian pogroms leave cold—"impartial" Jews, denying unpleasant facts, because, ostrich-like, we choose to close our eyes to them?

Great is the need for emphasizing the "Consolation of Jerusalem" in this country. True, the number of those is daily growing who have come to see the force of the winged words uttered by Emma Lazarus, "As long as one of us is not free, we are

none of us free." And all honor to those who for years have toiled for the international recognition of the equality of all the citizens of this country. Triumphantly have they succeeded, and at the same time have they rendered the name of America illustrious, the moral hegemony among the nations thereby becoming hers. Yet it so happens that an influential portion of American Jews fail to see that religion is a social phenomenon, an ethnic force, far more than merely the individual's attitude towards the ultimate problems of life. The pan-Judaic outlook is abandoned, and its place is taken by a narrow tribalism, called "American Judaism." The inventor of this term has also formulated the watchword and creed of the movement. It runs thus: "America is our Zion and George Washington is our Messiah." According to this new revelation, a deliberate estrangement from the collective consciousness of the Jewish people and the Jewish Past is held forth as the course of conduct which true Americanism dictates.

We will not now analyze the wilderness of misconceptions involved in this pathetic reasoning. We can but point to the primitive notion of patriotism upon which it is based. That patriotism implies that all the inhabitants in any one land are to believe alike is not the American, but the mediaeval, theory, carried into practice by a Ferdinand and Isabella. Just as little is the demand that there be but one language and one tradition in the land, American. Such is the Cossack ideal. In Russia all the peoples that do not belong to the dominant stock—whether Jews, Finns, Armenians or Tartars—are ruthlessly crushed under the Juggernaut-car of Russification. Whither such a leveling downward of all ethnic individuality leads is best exemplified in the China of not so long ago. There we beheld hundreds of millions of human beings who looked alike, thought alike, talked alike. This spectre of "Chinesism," i. e., one endless barrack-like uniformity, destructive of all color, variety, character is beginning to loom on the horizon of European and American

life as an awful danger to civilization.\* No wonder that the greatest of empires, an empire in which the sun never sets, has a far different conception of what patriotism is. It respects the personality of all the racial groups found within the borders of its world-wide dominion. Nay it fosters the linguistic heritage of the French Canadian, the Welshman, the Africander Boer, and encourages them all to develop along their own lines as French Canadians, Welshmen, Boers. If, therefore, in a free land like this, any man denounce the cultivation of Hebrew, for example, as Orientalism and the Consolation of Jerusalem as unpatriotic, that man is an alien in spirit to the genius and institutions of the Anglo-Saxon peoples, were he ten times American-born. And even though he do it all in the name of the "Mission of Israel," he has no conception of the trend of civilization, he does not begin to know the meaning of true patriotism, and is neither Jew nor American. Patriotism is not Moloch-worship to demand from us the purposeless sacrifice of what is dearest and holiest. And as for the Mission of Judaism, in America as elsewhere, that, as we conceive it, is first of all to be—Judaism.

My friends, I have now roughly sketched what will constitute the burden of my message to you. But I am not blind to the hostile forces arrayed against its fulfilment, to the disintegrating influences that threaten our Jewish consciousness. Times have changed, and we have changed with them. A story from classical mythology may bring home to us the altered conditions and the new problems of the present. We there read of a wanderer who on his voyages had to pass islands where sirens lured the mariner to certain destruction. That wanderer closed the ears of his men with wax and himself he fastened to the mast of his ship, from which, he ordered, he was on no account to be untied even at his own entreaties. The ship soon came near those islands and the sirens sang their sweetest. But

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\*See Rene L. Gerard, "Civilization in Danger," Hibbert Journal, July, 1908; and Joseph Jacobs, "Jewish Ideals," page 20.

the ears of his men were closed, they could not hear; he was tied and could not move. Is not this a picture of our manner of resisting the siren-voices of assimilation in preceding generations? These methods, however, are absolutely unavailing to-day. The walls of the Ghetto have fallen never to rise again. And even in Russia an intellectual intermarriage, much more deadly to us than the sporadic physical cases in our family life, is ravaging our ranks. What is to be done? The same story continues to relate that another crew on a later date passed the same fatal spot. This second time, however, there was neither fear of sirens nor necessity for protection. Orpheus, the renowned singer, was on board and his strains of irresistible beauty rendered the siren's allurements ineffectual.

That way alone lies our salvation, if we are successfully to meet the new occasions and vaster difficulties of the present. The spiritual quarantine forced upon us through the Middle Ages down to recent times can no longer be maintained. Instead, we must fill the hearts of our children with the melody of the Shema and all it connotes; teach them that there is an Eye, which seeth all things, an Ear which heareth all things, and that all our actions are written in a Book; strengthen their wills that they carve out for themselves honorable, creative lives; and plant within them the duty of the Consolation of Jerusalem, the sense of Jewish Brotherhood—and then we need fear no sirens, no treacheries, no apostasies. When we once realize that our children—in Talmudic phrase—are our Messiahs through whom alone our future can be regenerated, we must stand appalled at the extent to which we have neglected this duty, and at the antiquated weapons with which we have armed those we have not neglected. There are tens of thousands of Jewish children in our large Jewish centres, "abandoned" by us, left absolutely with no religious teaching. I shall cause you to listen to this "Cry of the Children." I shall ever remind you that "infinite

is the reward of him who helps even one soul to walk in the way he should go:" that,

"Heaven's gate is shut  
To him who comes alone;  
Save thou a soul  
And it shall save thine own."

I have no fear for the future of Israel if we but to ourselves are true. A religion that throughout the ages could make men and women die for it, is potent enough, vital enough, divine enough to revive the vastest Valley of Dry Bones.

In these my endeavors to deepen the spiritual life of this community, to bring back those who have strayed from the olden paths and rescue those who have never even trod them, I shall demand two things of you. One of these is loyalty. You must help me fulfill that service to Judaism I have it in me to render. And I explicitly demand loyalty, because many congregations, not exclusively in America, have in their attitude toward their rabbis reverted to Israel's Iron Age. "Woe to the generation that sits in judgment on its judges; woe to the generation whose judges require to be judged," is the rabbinical comment on the opening words of the Book of Judges. Again many conceive of the rabbinical office very much on the lines of those Berlin eighteenth century rationalists, David Friedlaender and his friends. One hundred years ago when they were consulted by the Prussian government as to the rabbi's place in Jewish life, they answered that a rabbi was merely the Koscherwaechter, the ritual expert in foodstuffs of the Jewish community. No doubt there is some truth in this definition; just enough in fact, to render it a clumsy caricature. But I shall not go to those Fathers of the Reform Jewish Church for my conception of my office. I shall aim to be the teacher who shows forth the eternal newness, applicability and holiness of Israel's Torah; the champion who defends it from all attacks whether from within or from without.

And, God willing, I shall do so fearlessly. A statesman had

recently to be found to deal with a delicate problem of empire. The selection of a certain name was very much applauded on the ground that he had never said anything which anybody ever remembered. It will be my earnest endeavor never to incur such praise. With malice toward none, with charity toward all, I will yet be no hesitating or uncertain witness to the Truth. You realize what this means. For over sixty years, Orthodox Judaism has in America been subjected to a running fire of ridicule, blasphemy and merciless warfare by the leaders of the liberalizing, the revolutionary, wing of our faith. In a free country, we have no right to complain of this. What we do complain of is that these children of progress deny us the right to defend ourselves! Reform Judaism as if fully aware of its total unsoundness of heart is touchy, and painfully so. It savagely resents any retort, no matter how gentle or justifiable. For a man to state "the other side" and give expression to his sincerest convictions as to the bankruptcy of American Reform —seeing that even some of its rabbis have become apostates; as to its barrenness, seeing that it has produced no religious awakening, no great spiritual achievement, not even a single notable hymn, is rankest heresy. I will look to you for loyal help in my conflict with illiberal liberalism.

And I shall demand charity. Let us be charitable in judging each other. I shall not invariably succeed, neither shall I please everybody—the latter I will not attempt. But let the day never dawn when I shall have to speak before armed critics and not to sympathetic worshipers. We might well recall the Talmudic parable of Body and Soul on the Judgment Day. The body pleads exemption from all punishment and shifts the blame on the soul, the divine spark which should have restrained the body, illumined it, and taught it how to aspire after heavenly things. The soul, on the other hand, declares that it, an emanation from the Divine, ever loathed sin. It was the body's gross clay which dragged it down into the mire of animality. The Almighty then causes the soul to re-enter the body and judgment is meted

out to them both for their combined transgressions during their earthly career. Often there are similar bootless recriminations between pastor and flock. By combined endeavor and united striving alone can we escape falling short of the achievable, and the consequent condemnatory verdict of posterity and the Judgment Day. By united endeavor and combined striving alone can we attain to a truer proclamation of Judaism and a manlier testifying to our faith by our lives, a sweeter communion with our Maker, and a nobler fellowship with all Israel and all Humanity. Amen.

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O God of the spirits of all flesh!

From my childhood up I have heard Thy call and longed for Thee to revive Thy work in the midst of the years. O Thou who givest wisdom to the simple, speech to the dumb and strength to the feeble, render Thou me a fit instrument for the carrying out of Thy purposes. Let me be as a harp and a lyre for the music of life—Thy precious message of Love and Truth to Thy children. Hard and arduous is the task I have undertaken, but none that trust in Thee ever labor in vain, ever end in confusion. Strait and difficult is the road I have to travel, yet I am cheered by the olden promise; “Whoever comes to purify can reckon on divine aid from Thy heavenly heights.” Turn unto me the hearts of those who have chosen me as their Shepherd, ensure unto me their loyalty—their charity—that I may indeed lead them unto Thee. Through me may there never result any contempt or misprision of holy things, any weakening of their sway over the lives of our children. Let the sacred Cause intrusted to me never suffer at my hands, but let Knowledge, Peace and Brotherhood increase through my service—that Thy Torah be magnified and Thy Name be glorified forevermore. Amen.



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